



UK TOWN & COUNTRY

Castle Combe & the Cotswolds

BY LUKE WATERSON



With its country estates, medieval taverns and pretty villages, it's no wonder the Cotswolds has charmed visitors since the 15th century

So beguilingly cute that numerous period filmmakers have sought it out as a set, Castle Combe rose to prominence in the Middle Ages as one of the Cotswolds' most celebrated weaving centres. And its scattering of honey-blond 15th and 16th-century houses have changed little since.

The castle may be long gone, but, as befits a settlement regularly proclaimed 'England's prettiest village', there are architectural delights from ancient taverns to 500-year-old weaver's cottages, photogenic packhorse bridges and a grandiose country mansion. Embosomed in a wooded valley in the surprisingly unsung southern flank of the Cotswolds near Bath, Castle Combe is also well positioned for visiting other surrounding stately homes. Come while the village remains a spectacularly untarnished trip back in time.



Castle Combe See & Do

15TH-CENTURY WALKING TOUR Walking Tour of Castle Combe

Why? Frozen circa 1500, chocolate-box perfect Castle Combe is small, without blockbuster sights, and best appreciated simply by strolling through. From the top of the village, of particular note are the two medieval inns either side of a beautifully preserved Market Cross, the gaggle of weaver's cottages by the Old Pack Bridge and the second crossing over the Bybrook stream – the still-pretty Roman Bridge.

Don't miss To the right of St Andrew's Church, walk through the pedestrian gate to imposing, 14th-century Manor House Hotel, nestled within the grounds.

Time tip Come Monday to Thursday to avoid weekend crowds and get swifter service

in pubs. Park above the village (Dunn's Lane), saving tricky parking manoeuvres in the centre.

THE VILLAGE CHURCH St Andrew's Church

Why? The 15th-century butterscotch-coloured church of St Andrew's, overlooking Castle Combe's Market Place, presents a rare opportunity for visitors to explore inside one of the village's buildings. The church thrived on the neighbourhood's once-lucrative wool trade and features an impressive fan-vaulted ceiling reminiscent of more-famous Bath Abbey. The star attraction within, though, is one of Britain's earliest working clocks, keeping time since before 1500.

Don't miss The display on the filming of Steven Spielberg's *War Horse*, which took place in the village in 2010.

Left: Parsonage Wood, Above: Old Pack Bridge, Castle Combe, Right: the village, Above right: the Keeper's Lodge



Time tip If time is not on your side, make a beeline for the clock and insert 20p to see the ancient workings illuminated. bybrook.org.uk; free but donations accepted

THE WOODLAND RAMBLE Castle Combe to Ford Walk

Why? Most people are aware of the Cotswolds Way, which skirts this region's western edge, but few know of the gorgeous, less-traipsed trails here, such as this circular five-mile ramble starting in Castle Combe itself

and with a walking time of between two and three hours.

Begin by the village's first (uppermost) house, ascend into one of England's loveliest woods, Parsonage Wood, and continue along the Macmillan Way, along to Ford and the idyllic White Hart inn. Return on the Bybrook valley's other side, finishing with a stroll through the Manor House Hotel's sumptuous grounds.

Don't miss Stopping for a drink or lunch at the beautiful White Hart in Ford: surely a contender for Britain's best beer garden.

Sleep

The Keeper's Lodge



What? Tasteful gamekeeper's apartments

Our verdict Offering two elegant, rustic, self-catering apartments a pleasant 20-minute walk from the village centre, the Keeper's Lodge is more than your average holiday let. Not only is it excellently appointed, but its well-stocked kitchens provide tasty snacks and everything you need to rustle up a gargantuan breakfast. There are also 17 acres of woodland and paddocks to recce.

We love Secluded, thoughtfully-furnished apartments that manage to walk the line between self-catering and B&B; and the patio seating overlooking the grounds.

We don't love Walking through the woods from the property into Castle Combe; it's easy to get lost.

Need to know The official line is two-night minimum stays; but exceptions are sometimes made if you ask.

£130 ££200 £££10 £££30 & keeperslodgecastlecombe.co.uk

The Old Museum



What? Transformed village museum

Our verdict Castle Combe's former museum has been converted into a cosy holiday let, rentable by the night, which does wonders with limited space to blend the best of rustic and modern. Think flagstone floors, power showers, light, bright furnishings, wood-burning stove, a gleaming kitchen and a coffee machine.

We love Within a five-minute walk of the centre, the Old Museum provides a superb location but with plenty of welcome privacy.

We don't love The location on a beautiful but dark tree-shadowed lane can feel claustrophobic.

And parking is tight. colthamfarm.co.uk/accommodation/the-old-museum



Eat & Drink

Salutation Inn

What? 16th-century tavern

Our verdict Locals flock to the 'Sally's' – a spacious-but-snug beamed interior complete with log-burning stove – and it's easy to see why. There's friendly service, tasty old-fashioned grub, such as treacle-roasted ham with homemade piccalilli, and interesting local beers, such as the zesty WPA (Wiltshire Pale Ale), to sample.

We love Nursing a Wiltshire-brewed pint around the stove and bantering with the locals.

We don't love It's scraping the bottom of the barrel, but it would have been good to see more regional ales on tap.

thesalutationtheigbb.co.uk; mains avg £12

Castle Inn

What? Beamed inn with an innovative menu

Our verdict We could not fault the food at Castle Combe's busiest pub (highlights include the oh-so-soft pork belly, fat triple-cooked chips and delicious lemon-drizzled vegetable sides). But service, while amiable, occasionally stuttered (saying no tables are available, when several clearly are does make a poor first impression).

We love The beautiful, thick-walled interior and setting fronting the Market Place.

We don't love With the clientele largely being tourists who are sitting down to eat (you are discouraged from coming for a pint alone), the ambience can be a tad flat. thecastleinn.co.uk; mains avg £16

The Cotswolds See & Do

ANCIENT ABBEY-CUM-MANSION Lacock Abbey & Fox Talbot Museum

Why? Going strong for eight centuries, this one-time abbey, country house and birthplace of photography is understandably much frequented, especially with the heritage village of Lacock alongside boasting similarly ancient origins. The abbey stands firm, intriguingly incorporated into the building's subsequent transformations. The cloisters became novelty features of the 15th-century country home where William Henry Fox Talbot made photographic history in 1835 by creating the world's first-ever negative. A separate museum chronicles these developments.

Don't miss The enchanting cloisters and south gallery window where the aforementioned negative was taken.

Time tip Interesting aspects of the Fox Talbot Museum are covered in the self-guided tour. nationaltrust.org.uk/lacock-abbey-fox-talbot-museum-and-village; £13.40 1

THE DEER PARK Dyrham Park

Why? It sometimes seems every hill in this chunk of the Cotswolds harbours a wooded enclave lovingly fashioned into a landscaped country retreat, but of all the fetching estates, Dyrham Park wins the beauty contest. You enter from the main A46 road at the top and everything thereafter is increasingly serene: the descent over 275 acres of open parkland through patches of woodland to the striking lily-pond-dotted formal gardens and the stupendously-sized mansion itself, with deer herds wandering in and out of the picture.

Don't miss The award-winning courtyard café/tearoom, often serving venison dishes from the estate's deer, alongside great homemade cakes and snacks.

Time tip From the car park it's a 15-minute walk or five-minute



Above: Deer at Dyrham Park, Above right: the approach at Lucknam Park Hotel, Right: The Old House at Home

courtesy bus ride down to the house, but it's worth taking the 45-minute scenic trail for wonderful views across to Wales. nationaltrust.org.uk/dyrham-park; £12.50 2

THE MANOR GROUNDS Lucknam Park Hotel & Spa

Why? Lucknam Park, one of several lavish country estates hereabouts, is arguably the Cotswolds' best hotel: but you can still enjoy this aristocratic playground without splurging on accommodation. The mile-long 400-strong double avenue of lime and beech trees, dating back to 1827, comprises one of England's grandest hotel approaches. But it also makes a good walk, and non-guests can wander this, the park's walled garden and its arboretum. A spa is on-site, too.

Don't miss The equestrian centre, where you can feel like the lord or lady of the manor by touring the estate on horseback. **Money-saving tip** The British-European Restaurant Hywel Jones is expensive for its three-course menus; eat at the Brasserie for 20% off the price, where mains average £13-24. lucknampark.co.uk; grounds free, horse-riding £85 per half hour, 60-minute spa treatments from £70 3

Sleep

Guyers House



What? Country garden manor **Our verdict** Initial impressions wowed: ornate grounds with lily ponds, walled gardens and a croquet lawn that would shine out in any Country Life magazine. Inside, vestiges of that luxuriousness continue, with chandelier-hung rooms, and Victorian cartoon sketches on the walls. Dinnertime paves the way for some sublimely cooked dishes, but the morose waiting staff create a distinctly chilly dining experience.

We love The topiary walkways leading to orchards, hidden seats

and statues, and the croquet lawn.

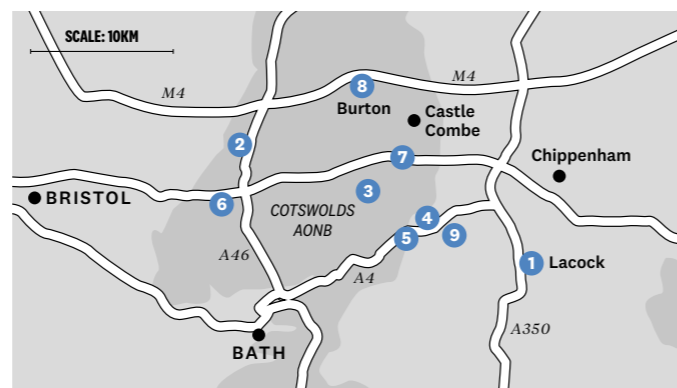
We don't love Service can be overly formal, some bedrooms are poky and have outdated bathrooms.

£130 £250 10! £0 ♿ guyershouse.com 4

Rudloe Arms



What? Outlandish period property **Our verdict** Two different stories could be written after staying in Marco Pierre White's eccentric-looking hotel-cum-restaurant. One: you hole up in the surreal-but-unique main house, where beautiful one-of-a-kind boutique rooms are decorated with



photography from Terry O'Neil and David Bailey, and encounter only friendly staff. The other: you check into a Treetops Room in the separate, modern building and get the too-cool-to-be-courteous treatment. It's a gamble.

We love Bizarre, opulent main house rooms, full of fascinating individual detail.

We don't love Certain staff members' attitudes and some disappointments at breakfast (come on: no jam and no fruit?). £110 £250 10! Some breakfasts carry supplement charges ♿ fee applicable depending on dog size and duration of stay ♿ rudloearms.com 5

Toghill House Farm



What? 17th-century B&B **Our verdict** On a hill overlooking Bristol from one side and rolling uplands from the other, this historic hostelry was originally accommodation for monks. In keeping with this history, some of its large, thick-walled rooms sport original 17th-century beams. Ascending from the cities to the west and south, this is among the first true tastes of Cotswolds countryside you encounter, featuring a hearty farmhouse breakfast and farm walking trails. **We love** Tucking into berries, Dorset cereals and a tasty full English with smoked sausages in the pretty conservatory breakfast room each morning.

We don't love The lack of a personal welcome, which can lend an unfriendly feel to the stay. **Money-saving tip** The website often offers three-nights-for-the-price-of-two deals.

£68 £98 10! £0 ♿ toghillhousefarm.co.uk 6

Eat & Drink

White Hart

What? Rambling riverside country inn **Our verdict** A 16th-century country pub idyll. It comprises three expansive eating areas, where delectable Sunday roasts are a menu highlight. There's a beamed bar stocked with ales, including a smooth, spicy Bybrook bitter, a log fire for winter and a verdant beer garden sloping to a stream for summer.

We love Location, location, lovely location – and the friendly and professional service.

We don't love The downside of a great pub: people know about it, and descend in their droves, especially come weekends.

whitehart-ford.com; mains avg £12.50 7

The Old House at Home

What? Tradition-steeped pub with culinary surprises **Our verdict** Replete with blackened beams, myriad nooks and crannies, and a blazing fire, The Old House at Home ranks among the area's snuggest watering holes. And the food, although uncomplicated, sparkles some way above average pub fayre: a feisty beef madras

eclipses what is served in most curry houses.

We love The creative mix of traditional English and Asian food and the buzzing, historic pub atmosphere.

We don't love It's sometimes too packed to get a table. ohhpubs.co.uk/old-house-home; mains avg £15 8

Mother & Wild

What? Snug café bar **Our verdict** This diminutive eatery exudes a French bistro feel with its dark-wood alcoves, suave yet down-to-earth service and continental-influenced small plates. Coffee is standout, as are the array of cakes tucked behind the counter, and come evening, the wood-fired sourdough pizzas delight with their flavours.

We love Lingering for the superb weekend brunch... pancakes with blueberries followed by heavenly brownies anyone?

We don't love This place is popular, which sometimes slows service right down.

Time tip Don't wait for table service – go up to order at the counter. motherandwild.com; mains avg £9.50 9



TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

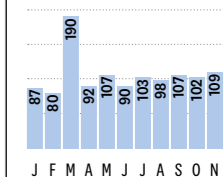
How to get there From London to Chippenham by train is £32 return and takes 1hr 15min. There are four buses a day to Castle Combe from Chippenham.

Getting around It's easiest to travel around the southern Cotswolds by car. For bus information, visit traveline.info

More information cotswoldsaonb.org.uk



HOTEL/NIGHT £ Cotswolds



DAILY HIGHS °C Castle Combe

